Helena Forde, del. et lith.

THE DUCK-BILLED PLATYPUS.

(ORNITHORHYNCHUS ANATINUS.)

From a photograph by Victor A. Prout.

Sydney, N. S. W.—Thomas Richards, Government Printer.—1899.

Duck-bill, or Water-mole.

(ORNITHORHYNCHUS ANATINUS.)

Our plate represents the most interesting of all the Australian animals,—the Duck-bill, Platypus, or Water-mole, which inhabits the quiet rivers, creeks, and lagoons of the greater portion of Tasmania and Australia. Known to everybody, and common in many parts, we have added nothing to the account given by Dr. George Bennett, F.L.S., &c., more than thirty years ago. Professional naturalists cannot afford the time for investigation, and few settlers with plenty of leisure will understand the importance of some of the questions yet to be solved.

Dr. Bennett informs us that the Water-mole constructs a burrow under creek or river bank, with the entrance beneath the water; in this place the mother brings forth her young, some of which Dr. Bennett captured, and beyond this fact we know nothing whatever. Considerable rewards have been offered for young Water-moles from time to time, but none have come to hand, and all our appeals for specimens (shot during October and November) in the flesh have been made in vain.

The total length of a full-grown Platypus is about 18 inches; the fur is short, dense, and velvety, that of the tail rather crisp; the general colour a dusky brown above, and somewhat paler below. Young and immature animals are bright brown above and whitish below. The few very young specimens obtained were from two to four inches in length, with very short beaks, and quite destitute of hair.

Unlike other mammals, the teeth of the Duck-bill are horny, and two are carried in each ramus above and below, giving a total of eight teeth; four of these, in the form of narrow strips, are situated in the fore part of the jaw, one in each ramus; the other grinder-like teeth are further back.

In harmony with its reptilian character,* we also find some horny teeth on the tongue, which is of moderate length. The eyes are very small, situated rather high up, at the base of the beak. The external orifice of the ear, hidden by the fur, is placed at a short distance behind the eye. The legs are strong, and very short; the feet provided with five toes. On the heel of the male is a large and sharply-pointed movable spur; this spur is pierced by a minute tube, the outlet of which is near the point; and, connected with this little tube, is a large gland, which is supposed to secrete a poisonous fluid. Mr. G. R. Waterhouse, whom we have frequently quoted in the present work, and to whom Australia is indebted for the best Natural History of the Marsupials ever published, doubts the poisonous nature of the gland, and states that Dr. Bennett has made frequent experiments upon himself without any evil result. It is possible that the spur has some poisonous properties during certain seasons of the year, because we remember being cautioned to handle a male Water-mole, by a gentleman who said that he once had been wounded in the arm by one, and had suffered severely in consequence.

It is not our object to go into the anatomy of a species so well described by the able pen of Professor Owen. We refer our readers to the Professor's many papers on the subject, and sincerely hope that country residents will continue to collect Water-moles, and observe their habits, for the benefit of science. A solution of strong salt and alum is sufficient for the preservation of the bodies, which should be opened, well washed (but not otherwise meddled with), and then put into the brine.

September, October, and November, are the most favourable months for collecting, and females only, which are destitute of the spur, should be secured.

Water-insects, small mollusca, and the ova of frogs and fishes, constitute the principal food of these animals.

(3c.12-71)

* Waterhouse. Natural History of Mammalia. Vol. I, p. 31.